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ABSTRACT

Teachers committed to breaking the silence on lesbian and gay issues in college-level writing classes can consult a growing body of literature by teachers similarly committed. None of this literature, however, has yet identified ways to bring readers in "queer" theory to the undergraduate writing class. Examining the work of four teachers who are progressive in their use of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom can provide suggestions for teachers as to how they might use "queer" theory to enhance their approaches. doris davenport, for instance, deliberately employing a challenging style that some of her colleagues call "confrontational," creates a tumultuous and transformative experience for her students, from whom she demands and often gets honesty and a willingness to confront cultural institutions. Any theory students get in her classroom, however, comes from her, and because no teacher, maverick or mainstream, is credible to all students, she encounters resistance. Three other teachers, L. E. Hart, S. H. Parmeter, and Sarah Sloane, stress the importance of a classroom where it is safe for students to write authentically--an objective that theory can be useful in furthering. Judith Shapiro's work on transsexualism is an excellent example of theory with which to engage students with gay issues. Questions for discussion and writing in the college classroom can be based on Shapiro's book. (Contains 7 sources for pedagogical use and 10 references.) (TB)

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Queer Theory in the Undergraduate Writing Course

Fran F. Koski

ED 391 160

I. Introduction

Teachers committed to breaking the silence on lesbian and gay issues in college-level writing classes can now consult a growing body of literature by teachers similarly committed. Some of it offers models for helping all students think and write critically and authentically about issues of sexual orientation in their individual lives (e.g., davenport; Hart and Parmeter).

None of the literature, however, has yet identified ways to bring readings in queer theory to the undergraduate writing classroom to help student writers explore current and historical societal patterns and imagine new ones. (By queer theory I mean theory which takes a questioning position toward gender and sexuality, challenging the status of these categories as "natural" bases of human society. This is gender theory that foregrounds questions, not answers, and gives students models of experimental and imaginative thinking on gender issues. It is suspicious of "identity" and the "normal.") The omission of queer-theoretical readings from antihomophobic pedagogy is often based on the assumptions that students will inevitably resist or misunderstand theory, that exploration of theory is undertaken only at the expense of exploration of students' individual experience, or that the instructor's own theoretical literacy should suffice.

I find classroom engagement with readings in queer theory to be of immense assistance in expanding the ways undergraduate students think and write about sexual orientation and gender. I introduce a range of excerpted queer theorists to help students think through, and beyond, a paradigm of personal sexual identity and analyze their and others' situations in the contexts of comparative cultures, history, and relations of power. Judith

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Shapiro's work on transsexualism and same-sex marriages across cultures lets students consider the boundaries between genders and between sexualities as socially constructed and maintained. Excerpts from Eve Sedgwick and Janet Halley help them see the dependence of "heterosexuality" on its "opposite," "homosexuality."

My theory-inclusive gender and sexual orientation unit may improve student writing because it pries thought and expression free of an unexamined heterosexual matrix, defamiliarizing linguistic and social assumptions. I invite students to use writing imaginatively and experimentally (for instance, to coin new personal pronouns) as part of their project of reconceptualizing gender and sexual orientation. Since I ask student writers to become gender theorists themselves, both their notions of sexual orientation and their relationships with writing often expand and change.

Below, I will first refer to the work of four teachers who share their ideas about gay and gender issues in writing courses or writing-intensive courses at the college level. While three of these teachers offer or imply practical models for enabling students to think and write incisively about issues of gender and sexuality, none of the four describes a pedagogy based in signficant part on students' understanding and application of theory. I will indicate how teaching queer theory might enhance these teachers' efforts. Next, I'll make a brief case for teaching theory, including excerpted theoretical readings, as part of any unit or emphasis on gay and gender issues in college writing courses. Finally, I offer a practical way of doing so, and a short bibliography of selected helpful sources. I wish to stress that my call for students' exposure to theory is intended to supplement, not supplant, the self-discovery that is often central to undergraduate writing-intensive and writing courses. Neither a personal nor a theoretical approach is ever

fully effective alone.

II. How Antihomophobic Pedagogy Could Be Enhanced with Theory

doris davenport describes her writing-intensive Women's Studies course as one in which she presents heterosexism, sexism, racism, and classism as an "inseparable grid" (59). Deliberately employing a challenging style which some of her colleagues call "confrontational" (63), davenport creates a tumultuous and transformative experience for her students, from whom she demands and sometimes gets honesty, willingness to observe and question the cultural institution of compulsory heterosexuality, and suspicion of all "universalisms" (71) or generalities.

Maybe it is her encouragement of healthy suspicion of generalizations in students new to critical thinking which causes davenport to minimize expressly theoretical readings and applications in this provocative course; she is obviously well-versed in theory herself. Any theory students get in her class comes mainly from the teacher, an arrangement that has decided drawbacks. Because no teacher, maverick or mainstream, is credible to all students, and because theories contest one another, a single source of theory is a limitation, especially if that source is the instructor. The frustrating denials of complicity or even experience with "isms" which davenport encountered in the early weeks of the course might have changed sooner and for more students had they read and been asked to apply excerpts from theorists who put such denials in contexts interrogative of the societal "stakes" involved in specific admissions and denials (Butler, Foucault, or Halley, for instance).

Less overtly theoretical in their reported approaches and protocols than davenport are Hart and Parmeter and Sloane, who stress the importance of what

Hart and Parmeter call "environment[s] where it is safe for all students to write authentically" (155). Sarah Sloane investigates the positions which lesbian and gay students negotiate for themselves from which to fulfill writing assignments that require personal responses; she shows that lesbian and gay students writing the "personal experience" paper often walk a precarious line between openness and obfuscation. Sloane mentions the simultaneous increase, in one student's academic writing, of lesbian self-revelation and citations to (unspecified) feminist theory, but draws no conclusions.

Describing an exciting unit of gay and lesbian issues in a college composition course, Hart and Parmeter insist on the importance of the entire class's engagement in "search[ing] out the roots of personal and cultural homophobia" (155), emphasizing, like Sloane, the ability of lesbian and gay student writers to break patterns of self-hate and self-censorship under the right conditions. Chief among those conditions for Sloane are the positive reactions and role-modeling of teachers. For Hart and Parmeter, the key is peers and teachers who are trustworthy readers (157). The kind of student writing Hart and Parmeter appear to prize most highly is confessional. They encourage such writing by means of readings like "interviews with lesbian and gay teenagers and adults, people talking and telling their stories, ...an AIDS memoir, an essay by a lesbian teacher . . . ." (158). Like davenport, Hart and Parmeter got some astoundingly honest and articulate writing from their students. Several students came out as gay during the course.

Hart and Parmeter's celebration of student risk-taking (167) is, alas, unbalanced by any apparent awareness of confidentiality issues that may crop up for students in the future--say, in their professional lives--to make participants regret their openness in this accepting and stimulating class.

Because it often deals with the dominant culture's constructions of and attitudes toward gayness, gay theory might very well have sensitized this class to the real dangers of certain disclosures. It surely would have helped students make the connections Hart and Parmeter failed to elicit between personal and societal "stories."

In "Mistaken Identities," Gerry Brookes similarly demonstrates the advisability of teaching gay theory. His college composition course, taught without any (planned or intended) political or theoretical content, became dangerous for some participants when one student, who had been writing homophobic diatribes, threatened violence. The note Brookes wrote the homophobe, expressing a typical liberal tolerance, ultimately affirmed the student's "us-them" distinction and failed to question the functions or naturalness of such a distinction, or the conditions which led the student to make it (9). Brookes's well-meaning, naive handling of the crisis substituted his own befuddlement--"there are mysteries here I cannot penetrate" (10)--for what could have been the class's opportunity to learn and apply theory to their real lives, and write about it, in a charged, compelling context.

III. Theorizing Social Change

davenport, Sloane, and Hart and Parmeter have set challenging examples of cutting-edge pedagogy and research for those of us committed to the goal of breaking the deafening silence on gay issues that pervades most writing courses. "Silence is not neutral; silence is straight" (Hart and Parmeter 171). I urge teachers working to implement this goal to sharpen their own and their students' critical skills even more finely by incorporating the reading, discussion, and application of theory into their courses. The heavy emphasis on authentic, personal expression so central to the daily operations of many

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writing classrooms--especially perhaps in classrooms where teachers invite students' investigation of lesbian and gay realities--may prove inadequate or couterproductive when participants are ready to move from self-understanding or -revelation to seeing societal patterns and strategizing alternatives.

As bell hooks argues in Talking Back, the personal is not always or automatically perceived as the political despite the feminist slogan which asserts the identity of the two. On the contrary, without a concomitant "sense of connection between one's person and a larger material reality" (106) which theory gives, emphasis on the personal can lead to a reactionary identity politics which seeks only the personal solution, at the expense of analysis or revisioning of societal power arrangements.

Since they approach the boundaries between genders and between sexualities not as naturally given but as dynamically and socially constructed to serve various purposes at various points in human history, contemporary queer and gender theories can help student writers think beyond the paradigm of personal or family "problems" in order to analyze their individual situations in the contexts of collective realities, history, and power. The "personal" must not be ignored; it is an all-important beginning, as well as a touchstone for the usefulness of any theory. The personal and the theoretical are in dialogue, transforming eachother. "Theorizing experience as we tell personal narrative, we have a sharper, keener sense of the end that is desired by the telling," hooks writes (109-10). That end is social change.

IV. An Example

Any of the theoretical selections from my bibliography could be immensely helpful to undergraduates thinking and writing about gayness. Almost all are written in accessible language; any selection which the

instructor feels would not be accessible to her particular students could be paraphrased and/or summarized for the class by student volunteers working with the instructor.

Foucault's theories on sexuality and discourse are by now so widely known that they often provide an attributed or unattributed basis for other theorists' writings. Acquainting students with Foucault, while not essential, gives them access to a reference pool shared among almost all contemporary theorists of gender and gayness. And because she has written, in dense language, a brilliant and influential book whose argument is that "any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual defninition" (1), Eve Sedgwick's theories are of obvious use and might be paraphrased for undergraduate consumption as well.

In the case of any theorist, I introduce and use him or her not as a transcendent "authority" but as another authoritative voice in a lively dialogue in which honest, thoughtful student voices are equally valid and authoritative.

Although or because it does not deal primarily with homosexuality (but see 252, 263), because it is cross-cultural in scope, and because it is clearly and enjoyably written, Judith Shapiro's "Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex" is an excellent example of theory with which to deepen and enrich the engagement of writing students with gay issues. Shapiro begins with this challenge:

> All societies differentiate among their members on the basis of what we can identify as "gender." All gender systems rely, albeit in differing ways, on bodily sex differences between

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females and males. How can we understand the grounding of gender in sex as at once a necessity and an illusion? (248)

Shapiro examines the question through a focus on transsexuals, "people who experience a conflict between their gender assignment, made at birth on the basis of anatomical appearance, and their sense of gender identity" (250), and shows how transsexualism highlights the fragility and artificiality of demarcations between masculine and feminine, gay and straight. Transsexualism "makes us realize we are all passing" (257). Shapiro's comparisons of transsexualisms in North America, Oman, South Africa, and Kenya (262-8) shatter what davenport called universalisms and suggest vividly that a person's "normal" gender role and sexual preference are functions of her society, economy, and time, not (or not only) biological or moral imperatives. The article ends not with a grand, totalizing conclusion but with a series of further questions and some observations, lending itself nicely to provocative class discussion and further writing assignments.

My questions for discussion and writing based on Shapiro's work include the following.

1. Applying Shapiro's and your own ideas of what a "man" is, consider how the xanith in Oman (265-6) are, and/or are not, "men."

2. Is the North American Indian berdache (263-4) a shifter between two genders in a two-gender system, or is it more helpful for you to think of him/her as a "distinct third gender" (264)? Why?

3. Considering what the designations "homosexual" or "lesbian" mean to Shapiro and to you, why are or aren't the woman-woman marriages described by Shapiro on pages 265-8 "lesbian" or "homosexual"?

4. Do you find any of the words we are using here--man, woman, gay, lesbian, heterosexual, marriage, he, she--inadequate? Coin a new word for

your purposes. Define it, and use it in writing about Shapiro's article.

5. Apply Shapiro's theory that "we are all passing" to your life; "your life" includes things you have experienced and observed.

Selected Sources for Use in a Theory-Inclusive Antihomophobic Pedagogy

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